

EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY

SALIF KEITA

and the COUP D'ÉTAT

BY BROOKE WENTZ

The air is hot, the dust thick and the terrain dry. The nasal, whiny voices of Wassoulou women seep out of the tinny car radio as Cathy, my traveling companion, and me are being driven up the dirt hills surrounding Bamako, Mali's capital city. Only weeks before we were at Ouagadougou's famed FESPACO film festival in Burkina Faso and visited the towns of Bobo-Dioulasso, Mopti and Timbuctou. Now, during Ramadan and in the midst of pre-coup d'état uprisings, we cruise through desolate streets and witness pedestrians huddled to the side of the road. They cover their faces with kerchiefs to stop the penetration of tear gas, which is used to deter rioting students. Cars are turned over, debris is scattered, push carts are on fire, and children salvage anything they can.

Suddenly out of nowhere, a group of military tanks storm down the road at three times their normal speed. Heading directly for a group of children, the tanks don't slow down; they don't even honk. Screaming, the children scatter, leaving the remains of a cart behind.

On this Friday before Mali's two-day

strike (the first since 1963), which leads to a nationwide insurgency, hundreds of students aged 12 to 19 riot against President Moussa Traore's regime. "Vive AEEM (Association Élèves et Étudiants du Mali)!" they shout in support of the upcoming action. Storefronts and residential compounds display the same slogan in solidarity.

Cathy and I find safe haven in the upscale Hotel L'Amitié, where we encounter local hero Salif Keita. "This is not a good time," he emphasizes. "Too much blood is being shed in Mali. Over a hundred children have been killed today."

As a result, we stay with Salif all day and that evening, during a newly declared 9 p.m. curfew, Cathy and I ask for a ride back to our hotel. Salif complies but the hotel *concierge* comes running out screaming: "No, Salif. You can't go. You must stay here. You are too important to the country."

Crossing a dusty meridian, the 42-year-old albino superstar greets a pack of armed Malian soldiers after curfew in front of the radio station. "I'm not a political man," said Salif later. "I've always been a musician. I'm a man for the Malian people." In Mali, his artistic success supersedes political im-

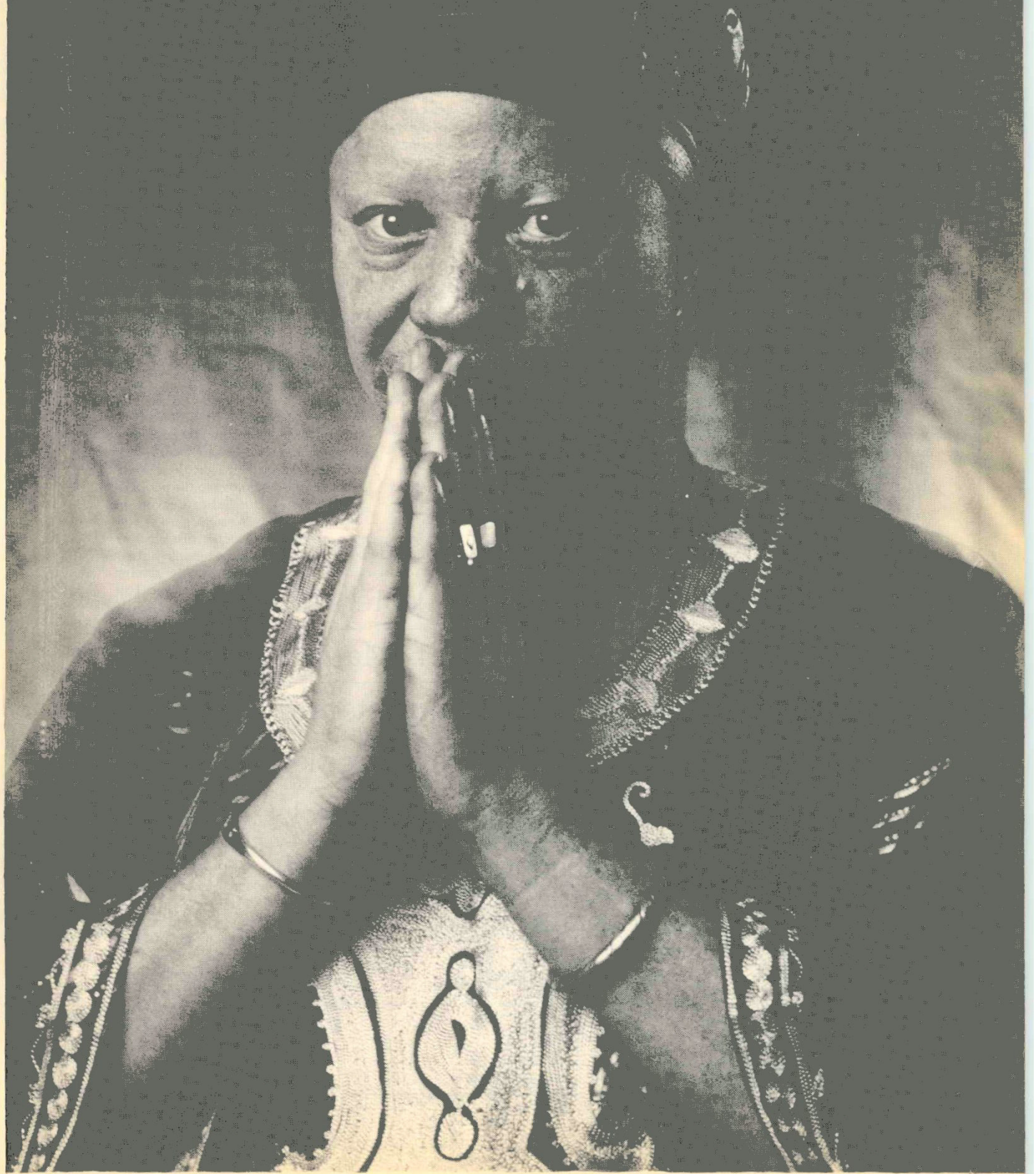
passes. Even in the midst of the March coup that ousted President Traore after 23 years in power and left at least 300 people dead, Salif stands above the conflict.



The singer/songwriter possesses an almost mystical hold over his fans. Through lyrics that espouse world harmony, with music deeply rooted in African tradition and reorchestrated for non-African ears, Salif's compositions stir the consciousness of listeners through-

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spiritual, wise and angelic.



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out the world. Voiced in Bambara, Mandinke and French, his songs discuss the gradual deterioration of African customs. International audiences may not be able to understand the words but they are swept up by his rich, Islamic-tinged voice and fusion of musical styles.

"Africans like things hidden," notes Salif. "Sometimes it is the words and other times it is the melody. The Senegalese, for example, don't speak Bambara or Mandinke, but they understand the melody and rhythms of my music. That's why I bring in many flavors."

Salif's keen sense of combining Western harmonics and African rhythmic structures and melodies has influenced musicians around the world. Singer-songwriter Jackson Browne featured his ethereal wailing on "World in Motion." Carlos Santana opened his 1990 concert tour with "Soro," the title track from Salif's brilliant 1987 album. Brazilian composer/keyboardist Wagner Tiso incorporated the Malian's fiery Muslim voice on the *Baobab* soundtrack. And this past year he was invited to record Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine" for the AIDS benefit recording *Red, Hot & Blue*. Conversely, Jean-Luc Ponty covered "Cono" on *Tchokola*, which features two of Salif's former musicians—drummer Brice Wassy and guitarist Yves N'Djock.

Keita's stage demeanor parallels that of a truth-seeking shaman—spiritual, wise and angelic. "His music helps people reach a higher level of consciousness," comments Santana, "looking to grow and reflect the positive spirit." Because he is an albino, he is ostracized and marginalized, a figure who in medieval times African rulers might have sacrificed to appease spirits. His personal aura, both on and off stage, is deep; he regards himself as a cursed prophet and sports a mirror on one of his hats so those talking to him can see themselves rather than his potentially alienating features. Yet his photo is seen everywhere in Mali: in ads, in restaurants and on the back of matchboxes.

Salif's third solo album, *Amen* (Mango), produced by Joe Zawinul, recruits the talents of Santana and jazzmen Wayne Shorter and Bill Summers. Recorded in Paris and Los Angeles, *Amen* is an elaborately arranged record with articulate rhythm passages, lush vocal arrangements and a punchy horn section. Unlike his two prior solo recordings—*Soro* and *Ko-Yan*—Salif's latest effort features pronounced synthesized instrumentation and smooth-riding funk sections, all a result of involving Weather Reporter Zawinul. (Unfortunately, Shorter and Santana's contributions have been so watered down in the mix that

they could have been played by virtually any talented guitarist or soprano saxophonist.)

"The title *Amen* is a benediction to God," says Salif. "Everyone understands its meaning. But it also represents democracy in the world and in Africa, where in Mali we are moving toward democracy and a multiparty system."



Cathy flew to Paris on the last plane out that Saturday, March 23. I was to leave the next day for Abidjan, as was Salif. But just before curfew hour we hear that all flights are cancelled and all borders closed. Helplessly stuck in Mali, I stick close to our national hero, one who can open more doors than any military official. Salif decides we should drive to Abidjan in his BMW sedan. He instructs his driver to get the car tuned up so we can leave on Monday and arrive in the Ivoirien city 24 hours later. Reluctantly, I call the U.S. Embassy but they have as little information as we do. Drinking *citron* presses and making friends with whomever is in the hotel—journalists, dignitaries and an Algerian flight crew who try to befriend me because they think American women are loose—I eat peanuts, take in their ridiculous, amorous attempts and move to the pool.

Salif, decked in Western garb—leather hat, black leather jeans and silk shirts—sporadically returns to check on me. I sit with Amada, Salif's sidekick, and take notes on the new album. I begin to feel like Salif's unofficial African wife: He refuses to let me pay for anything and begins to call me Njama.

As we have a drink, a uniformed soldier comes up to the bar and greets Salif. Astounded that this man is having a beer on duty, my eyes widen and expression turns to horror. Salif senses my vibe and politely says to the soldier: "Good evening. How are the men doing across the road?"

Later, while I listen to *Amen* in its fi-

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listening for potential rioters to
come through the door. Our Malian
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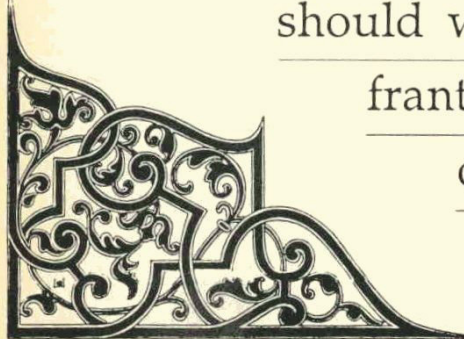




PHOTO BY BROOKE WENTZ

CHILDREN WITH A SATIRICAL POLITICAL BANNER GATHER OUTSIDE BAMAKO ON THE MORNING OF THE COUP.

nal, unsequenced form, Salif is off doing business. Island Records has allowed him to sell a digital audiotape (DAT) of the album to the African cassette manufacturing companies. "This way," notes Salif, "at least one of us makes some money." (Music pirating is a huge business in Africa, and one in which musicians rarely see a penny of income.)



Amen addresses such contemporary issues as the question of democracy in Mali and the Ivory Coast. The album focuses on unity among all peoples, particularly Africans. He does not chastise the white man nor put the black race on a pedestal. Instead, Salif insists we must all work, love and fight together against the political evils that usurp all governments. On "Waraya," he sings:

*The sun of democracy is here
Let's welcome it with courage
It is only a beginning*

*It must grow
For men
And women
Let us all be bulwarks*

"Kuma" discusses the issue of honesty and the belief that if you don't say what's in your heart, you won't be satisfied.

*Words are seething from my guts
Do you see?
Words are seething from my guts
But words must be learned
They may only be used by those who give
birth to them
Words meeting up with their master
The truth-telling master who has no
friends
Speech is an education*

"Yele n Na" is an optimistic tune dealing with laughter, and "N B'I Fe," the upbeat dance single which translates to "I Love You," is sung in Bambara, French and English in order to cross over to different audiences.

Aside from Salif's core of musicians—Cameroonian bassist Etienne M'Bappe, Ivorian drummer Paco Sery and Malian keyboardist Cheik Tidiane Seck—*Amen* features one of the singer's long-time colleagues and former coleader of Les Ambassadeurs, Guinean guitarist Kante Manfila. A choir of five West African vocalists, including Djene Doumbouya (also featured on *Soro*) and Djanka Diabate (whose album *Djanka* is now out on Sound Wave).



It's curfew time in Bamako once again on this Monday, March 25. I miss Salif for dinner. While waiting in L' Amitie's lobby, I encounter our guide from Mopti. We have a beer and he offers me a ride to the Hotel Rabelais where I've moved my things. The guide is anxious to get out of Bamako. He finds it too noisy, the people too nervous and tension building in the air.

After he drops me off, I go to fill my
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SALIF AND THE COUP *Continued from page 41*

stomach with vegetable *couscous* from one of the few African restaurants open nearby. The streets are unusually quiet and a weird temperament is almost palpable.

Asleep at 10 p.m., I'm awakened at 5 a.m. by a phone call. The French concierge tells me to pack my bags, keep the lights off and come downstairs as quickly as possible. Packing in a panic, I scurry, half-asleep, to the door where a young Frenchman—who lived in Mauritania for seven years and is well-acquainted with African politics—knocks to calm me and see if I'm OK. No problem! Just tell me what the hell's going on.

"The military captured President Traore and his wife around midnight," he says. "You didn't hear the gunshots and tanks? We've been up all night."

The coup took place early this morning. Traore was caught trying to flee the country shortly before midnight. Military agents burnt and killed his brother as looting took place all over Bamako. Fires

blaze at almost every corner, and nearly all government buildings, offices and homes of officials have been demolished. Many of the Lebanese commercial concerns have been destroyed, and two doors down from the Hotel Rabelais, chairs, desks and adding machines spill out from the central bank.

We wait patiently inside the hotel, listening for potential rioters to come through the door. Our Malian gatekeeper, huge club in hand, stands ready to attack anyone who breaks through. Cars wait for us out back should we need to escape, and frantic scampering is heard on the street.

As the sun comes up I move to the balcony and watch people scurry through the streets with huge sacks of rice, millet, flour and anything else they can carry on top of their heads, over their backs, on mopeds and in cars. The residents are taking their share: car parts, ceiling fans, rolls of plastic, planks of wood, mats and

the like. Four tanks roll by with soldiers crying out, "A bas Moussa!" (Moussa has fallen). Only hours earlier they fenced in women and children inside the *grand marché* and set it ablaze. Now they wave at the people and the people wave back.

I walk through town. Bloodstained doctors—many from *Médécins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders, a French relief organization)—spasmodically search for things they will never find, such as tourniquets, needles and bandages. The hospital reads "No Entry": too sick, too gruesome, too wretched. Walking into L'Amitié, I observe visiting foreigners who are afraid to enter Bamako's postcoup streets. Hotel employees suggest they stay put. But I begin to sense the relief felt by the locals. With the killing stopped, Mali is prepared to head in a new direction, and a surge of excitement is in the air.

Salif sees me and says: "Come. I'm going to take you to my village. You will

PHOTO BY BROOKE WENTZ



SALIF KEITA'S BROTHERS AT THE MANGO PLANTATION 45 KM. OUTSIDE OF BAMAKO.

meet my parents and see my home town." Ecstatic, I answer: "Great. Je suis prêt!"

Sitting in the BMW with Amada next to me, I wait patiently while Salif's cousin, Bodibo, is out negotiating a goat. Salif stands by the side of the car where children crowd around and stare. Four women sit in a circle with their babies strapped on their backs and sew the cracks of calabashes while the little ones cry.

"Why do the children stare?" I ask Amada. "When Salif is in Mali, he has no money," says Amada. "Watch."

Salif looks at the children who silently look back. After a short conversation in Bambara, Salif takes out a wad of French francs and gives it to one boy. The children run off to split the stash.

Bodibo returns with the goat, feet tied and crying. They put it in the truck and drive home where three men kill, skin, gut and tie the animal to a tree. It will be cooked for a feast later tonight. Distraught, I watch the entire process. Salif and Amada gorge on mangoes, orange sloop dripping onto the dirt, while they discuss politics and disagree on who will be in power next.



A direct descendent of Soundiata Keita, the Mande ruler who founded the Malian empire in 1230 AD, Salif is the third of 13 children born to a well-off landowner, Sina, and his two wives. He grew up in an Islamic household but was educated in French schools. Early on, young Salif considered becoming a teacher but because of his poor eyesight, he turned to singing, an occupation his parents frowned on.

At 18, he headed to Bamako and joined one of his brothers performing in local nightclubs. Two years later in 1970, Salif met up with the government-sponsored Rail Band, a 16-member orchestra that played in one of Bamako's grand venues—the railway station's Buffet Hotel de la Gare.

"We played a little bit of everything—French music, Latin music, jazz and rock," recalls Salif. His exposure to these cosmopolitan grooves, combined with those from neighboring Guinea, Senegal and the Gambia, formed the basis of much of his later rhythmic style. "In the 1970s I listened to Cuban music on the radio and started buying cassettes of Pink Floyd, Joe Cocker, James Brown and Ray Charles. Today I listen mainly to Malian folklore, reggae and French *variété*." (Last year, Salif produced *Balendala Djibe* by Malian griot singer Sanougue Kouyate for Mango.)

Salif left the Rail Band in 1973 to join Les Ambassadeurs. His strong vocal meanderings made such an impression on West African audiences that Guinea's President Ahmed Sekou Toure presented the singer with an award for his cultural contribution to Africa. He was also awarded the National Order of Guinea. In return, Salif wrote one of his most famous compositions, "Mandjou," dedicated to Toure and the Mandingo people.

As the political climate grew increasingly violent in Mali in the mid-'70s, Salif moved to Abidjan, the flourishing artistic capital of the Ivory Coast, changing the band's name to Les Ambassadeurs Internationaux. They began recording in the city's modern studios, and as the group's popularity increased throughout the region, so did Salif's.

Salif came to Washington, DC, in 1980 and brought three members of Les Ambassadeurs with him to record some tracks, including "Primpin," heard on *Wassolon-Foli*. The song addresses drinking and drug problems in society and was re-recorded in 1989 for *Ko-Yan* with a fuller though less rootsy horn section and more electronic programming.

Eventually, due to economic reasons and France's accessibility to Europe, Salif moved to Paris, following in the footsteps of his African colleagues like Mory Kante, Toure Kunda, Ray Lema and Manu Dibango. He now lives in the Montreuil section of Paris, one of some 15,000 Malians there. "It was easier to meet musicians and travel internationally from Paris," explains Salif. "I had a lot of problems when I arrived. It took me a while to get use to the pace and society. But I began playing in the French provinces and writing melodies and text for my first solo album."

In 1985 Salif Keita struck up a relationship with Guinean music producer Ibrahima Sylla (of Syllart Records). Together they created Salif's highly praised landmark recording, *Soro*, released in 1987. "I wrote it in two months," the singer explains. "I wrote the melody, text and rhythms, and we hired an arranger [Jean-Philippe Rykiel and Francois Breant] to put it together."

Soro was one of the first West African records to blend deeply rooted Malian griot folklore with sonically expansive arrangements as well as to incorporate synthesized and sampled traditional African instruments, such as the kora, *balafon* and the *djembe* (West African tom-tom).

Each track is a masterpiece in itself. "Sanni Kegniba" begins with an eerie whirl melting into Keita's ethereal vo-



SALIF'S TWO PREVIOUS ALBUMS: EACH TRACK ON *SORO* (TOP) IS A MASTERPIECE IN ITSELF. *KO-YAN*, (BOTTOM) ELICITS A PLUSH ROMANTICISM.

cals, while preprogrammed kora segments brighten the dreamlike ambience. Likewise, the title track moves along at a steady pace, picking up momentum with a rock-solid rhythm section. Rich female voices, punchy horn sections and poppy, hard-driving arrangements make for a vibrant, unforgettable recording. And Rykiel's synthetic keyboards sound richer and more mysterious than Zawinul's L.A.-phile tamperings on *Amen*.

"The music is still African," says Salif, who consciously created a sophisticated synthesis of cultures for Western audiences. "I like using synthesizers because you can program traditional instruments in them and change the dominants and ranges. They are a working tool. When an African doctor goes to America to learn medicine, he doesn't come home and use an axe."

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SALIF AND THE COUP *Continued from page 43*

Two years after the release of *Soro*, Mango released Keita's second solo album, *Ko-Yan*. Its single, "Nou Pas Bouger" (which translates as "we will not be moved"), can be heard on the radio throughout Mali. Less cerebral than the songs on *Soro* and more traditional than those found on *Amen*, *Ko-Yan* elicits a plush romanticism. "Sabou" (The Cause) begins with recorded water and cricket sounds, and breaks into a lush, textural synthesized string section. Guitarist Ousmane Kouyate (who released a solo album, *Domba*, in 1990) is also featured throughout the album. "Yada" epitomizes Keita's compositional style: Deep-felt, vibrant vocals combine with a cushioned chorus of nasal female voices, tactile kora and balafon sounds, and a locked-in rhythm section. The tempo moves and *kalimbas* groove.



Driving to Djoliba after hanging the goat meat out to dry, we spend almost two hours trying to find gas for the car. Onlookers in the street spot the fancy vehicle, then a white person, then another white, then Salif. When they recognize him, they wave and shout: "Nous pas bouger!" Children parade through the wide roads carrying a banner with Moussa's head transposed on a cow's body. The very young recoil when seeing me—a *toubab* (white).

Smashed cars in the road deter traffic. Something Amada says to Salif ticks him

off. Like a schoolboy, Salif punishes Amada by not letting him have any water. They soon make up and start singing over the radio broadcast of traditional vocal music. The program is broken up by news reports. Voting procedures are announced as well as a list of the 50 men appointed to take office, who include Amadou Toumani Toure, Oumar Diallo, Anatole Sangare, Mamdou Doucoure, Kafougouna Kone, Bakary Coulibaly and Ousmane Maiga.

Driving through the countryside on the bumpy, unpaved roads, groups of dried-mud-and-grass huts dot the terrain; green trees become scarcer. Rust-colored dust begins to seep into everything. My eyes become accustomed to the heavy sun and my sunglasses, already broken, are no longer needed. Sweat runs down my back as I watch with amazement the way the Africans—men and women—walk, swaying their hips back and forth like dancers, their torsos and shoulders steady and straight on.

We spot a beautiful young woman and her two-year-old child on the way to Djoliba. Salif greets her and gives them a ride back to the village. I learn later that this woman is his sister, who, along with another of his sisters, is married to the same man.

We meet his father, mother, five sisters and a few brothers. Offering us mangoes and raw cow milk—rainy and sweet—I realize no one else is eating. In this month of *Karem*, practicing Muslims don't eat until after sundown.

Covered head to toe, wrinkled and wise, Salif's mom sits quietly watching the men. One sister jokes about my name and insists on giving me a new one. Salif tells her he has already given me one. I ask Amada to tell Salif's parents that their son is very well known throughout the world. He translates. Mom giggles and slaps Salif warmly on the thigh.

As Salif recounts the day's political events to the entire family, the midday heat swallows me and I doze off, lulled by the Bambara conversation.

Later on, we stop at Salif's recently inherited mango plantation, which he plans to transform into a recording studio. The guardian, his son and a co-worker, Amada and Salif shoot the breeze while I take in the expansive landscape and drink water to cool down. Waiting patiently, I notice the guardian goes into a room and returns with a kerchief-wrapped 1960s-vintage wartime pistol.

"It's for protection," the guardian says. He and Salif argue like naive children about how to place the decrepit bullets in the barrel. I cringe. Any moment it looks like they're going to hurt themselves. I begin to laugh at their ineptitude and innocence.

I'm tired. They're tired. It's been a long day. Driving back to Bodibo's for an evening feast, we fall asleep in the car. An inch of dust sticks to my wet skin, and I look forward to moving on to Abidjan.

Brooke Wentz is an independent producer, writer and Africaphile who lives in New York City.

AUTHOR BROOKE
AND SALIF TAKE A
MOMENT TO POSE
DURING THEIR JOUR-
NEY TO DJOLIBA.



VIDEO REVIEW

Director Chris Austin's carefully wrought documentary reveals the conflicts and contradictions of the life of the enigmatic noble-born musician Salif Keita and the ultimate inspirations of his art. The chronicle resonates with the tension between the dichotomies of ancient and modern, black and white, rich and poor, noble and common. There is a potent sense of the irony of his birth with white skin in black Africa to a royal family with little power in the modern world and his rejection of inherited nobility for the poverty compelled by his artistic vision.

Destiny of a Noble Outcast provides a serendipitous visual companion to Brooke Wentz's encounter with Salif. Although CNN-style news footage of the coup is not included (the film was aired by the BBC in 1990), the video biography, with Salif as tour guide, offers a glimpse of some of the same locales visited by Brooke during her visit to Mali. It also provides a varied selection of concert footage, impromptu offstage performances and, throughout, Salif's glorious voice on the soundtrack.

We visit his home village of Djoliba, meet his parents and view the venues of his early career: the bar in Bamako, the Buffet Hotel de la Gare where he played with the Rail Band from 1970-73, and

the motel home of La Cora Night Club where he joined Les Ambassadeurs. Following his footsteps, we see his move to Paris and from there to international fame.

In the village, his father Sina tells how a *marabout* (soothsayer) foretold that he would have a son who would be outstanding in every way, unlike all others, with a power the others will not have. What parent would not be pleased to hear this seemingly optimistic prediction about an unborn child? He performed the sacrifices he was instructed to make. A docudrama reenacts the baby's birth and the father's dismay on discovering that his son is an albino. He asks, where has the child come from and what has he come to do? He tries to drive away the mother, Nassira, but ultimately resolves the situation with the Moslem consolation: It is in the hands of God.

Salif then picks up the story of his difficult childhood, telling how, in a sun-drenched land, he couldn't abide the sun and how he was tormented by the cruelty and superstitions surrounding albinism. Another reenactment depicts his first day at school and his classmates' shock when they see him. He recalls how he loved the

DESTINY OF A NOBLE OUTCAST

master's voice at the Koranic school but was taken to the French school instead.

With a roar of trucks, buses, mopeds and cars, we are in Bamako. Salif takes us to the bar where he used to play and treats the patrons and viewers to an intimate performance of "Primpin," accompanying himself on an acoustic guitar. Reminiscing about his early days in the big city, he tells how he used to sleep outdoors and was adopted by a local lunatic who never spoke but who took care of him.

We visit the Hotel de la Gare and realize the importance of the railroad that connects landlocked Mali with the Atlantic coast at Dakar, Senegal. This geographical isolation, Salif points out, has kept Mali's traditions intact and strong.

We also tour the motel where Les Ambassadeurs performed by the pool Saturday and Sunday evenings from 4 to 8 p.m., the place where "Mandjou" gave Salif his first taste of fame. He tells how the song affects people, and we then cut to a concert where he is singing it, impassioned, on his knees.

*Island
Visual Arts,
1991.
90 mins.*

One delightful segment shows Salif's triumphal return to his home town, greeted by the village *griottes*, beautifully robed women who sing the praises of his imperial ancestor Soundiata Keita. At the subsequent concert in the village square, he sings with the women to the accompaniment of traditional instruments—no microphones, amplifiers or synthesizers—revealing the soul of music as it has been performed for hundreds of years. It is gratifying to see his ultimate acceptance by the village that rejected him as a child.

In a brief, fortuitous encounter with Manu Dibango at the Farafina restaurant/club in Paris, he says "music pleases God," inspiring the realization that even modern-day musicians can be prophets, priests or chiefs of the global village, providing guidance, leadership and music, the sacred talisman.

"Your fate is sealed—you cannot escape from your destiny." This is the message read by the marabout in the cowries thrown by his patron. Salif's acceptance of that fate and all it implies is the message of this rich and illuminating work.

—CC Smith

SALIF KEITA